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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the views of four general education teachers who without prior notice or training were assigned to teach special education classes. It also provides a short history of special education and requirements of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. The elements of special education and the specific levels of special education services recognized in the New York City school system are described. The narratives describe the problems of teaching seventh grade students who read at a second-grade level. It describes the classroom disruptions and discipline problems encountered by these four teachers. It also describes the unique difficulties of maintaining classroom order in the setting of classroom computer labs. Specific strategies for classroom management are suggested including seating arrangements and positive discipline. The use of handouts versus student copy work is also suggested. The experiences shared by these general education teachers suggest that in order for teachers to be effective and have success with special education, a general education teacher needs special training and knowledge of the students they will be teaching. (Contains eight references.) (JLS)

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General Education Teacher - Special Education Class
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Abstract

This article presents the views of general education teachers who without prior notice or training were assigned special education classes. This article also presents a short history of special education and information about special education classes. The experiences shared by these general education teachers lead us to the conclusion that in order to be effective and have success with special education classes a general education teacher needs special training and knowledge of the students he/she will be teaching. This training should be given prior to the assignment of special education classes.

Introduction

On my schedule in September I was programmed to teach seventh grade special education classes. I had never taught special education classes before. When the students arrived I met them at the door as I always do with all of my classes, upon entering the room the students began to behave in a way I was totally unprepared for. There were students running around chasing each other, students sitting or standing on the desks, students going under the desks, students cursing at each other non-stop, students arguing quite loudly over any little thing and students whinning and refusing to do the work because they could not be at the computer since there are not enough computers for the whole class and they must take turns using them. By the time they left the room I'd be totally exhausted and would have gotten about ten minutes of the forty minute period for actual teaching. This behaviour was repeated every time they came to my classroom. Was this special education? I really needed to find out about special education and the children assigned to these classes.

Special Education

Special education has its beginnings in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1975 which built upon the constitutional rights and protections of children with disabilities. It ensures that children with disabilities receive a free, appropriate, public education in the least restrictive environment. This education is based on an Individualized Education Program (IEP) that is agreed to and regularly reviewed by the child's parents and school. (Cunningham, 1995, p. 46). "Students are classified according to an array of categories, such as learning disabilities, mental retardation and

emotional disturbances. Special education instructional programs and teacher credentialing systems usually are organized according to the same categories and the same labels as the students." (Reynolds, Zetlin, & Wang, 1993, p. 294)

Special Education Classes

Special education classes service children with mental retardation, learning disabilities, impaired hearing, vision or speech, emotional or physical difficulties and provide a better chance for survival and ultimate school success. (Brutten, Richardson, & Mangel, 1973, p. 109). These classes prepare children with disabilities to wherever possible return to a regular class. It was planned that the children who faced obstacles that prevented them from achieving would be helped to overcome these obstacles and move on. (p. 108) The process of discovering the problem or obstacle and identifying what to do is a complex and emotionally wrenching experience. (Oakes & Lipton, 1990, p. 188) Misbehaviours such as the ones in my classroom could stem from a range of emotional/psychological conditions that affect the children.

Special Education Services

Children in special education classes are given related services which are either temporary or permanent and regularly scheduled in school or at home to aid the child and family in dealing with the handicapping condition. Professionals in special education provide psychological testing, counseling, school social work, occupational therapy, physical therapy, adapted physical education, school health services and transportation. (LeVert & LeVert,1994, p. 108) Teachers in special education generally provide academic instruction in subject areas such as reading, mathematics and science. Teacher preparation during college and afterwards is very important. Teachers in special education classes are trained in dealing with the special needs of their students. They know each child and what that child is ready for and how much he/she can handle. (Brutten, Richardson, & Mangel, 1973, p. 113) A special education teacher has "to control one's natural reaction of irritation, even anger, at a child who is disruptive,

demanding or defiant. Yet within the classroom she must establish a climate of emotional understanding , warmth, and support that will foster the best development of each pupil." (p. 114) The cost of providing special edducation and other services to about five million American children with disabilities is considerable. Congress contributes about $3.3 billion to an enterprize that costs up to $50 billion a year.(Cunningham, 1995, p. 46)

MIS I Class

I have been assigned MIS I and MIS II classes. MIS is Modified Instructional Services. The students in MIS I according to the Educational Services For Students With Handicapping Conditions put out by the New York City Public Schools are unable to maintain grade level expectancy and have not benefited from other less restrictive special and/or non-special education interventions. These students demonstrate significant academic difficulties in one or more of the following: reading skills, mathematics skills, and/or communication skills which could be either written or oral or both. The students social development which includes behaviour control is within the range of acceptable behaviour in the school setting. The student could however require support in a structured environment to maintain appropriate levels of behaviour. These students need smaller instructional groups for learning and more adult-directed supervision.

MIS II Class

The MIS II student according to the same source also have been unable to maintain grade level expectancy and have not benefited from other less restrictive special and/or non-special education interventions. These students have demonstrated considerable social and academic difficulties that significantly interfere with their performance within the classroom and school environment. These students also have deficits in one or more of the following: reading skills, mathematics skills, and/or communication skills which could be written or oral or both. The students social development which includes behaviour control, interaction with others and emotional responsiveness may significantly

interfere with the acquisition of learning. These students find it difficult to interact appropriately with others and manage self-control. They can be withdrawn or they can have acting out behaviours. These students need smaller instructional groups, constant adult-directed supervision and the assistance of another adult in addition to the teacher. They also need the availability of crisis-intervention services.

MIS III - MIS IX Classes

There are other special education classes. MIS III classes have students who require intensive instruction in language and communication in all subject areas. MIS IV is an early-childhood program for children needing special education. MIS V (Functional Academics/Life Skills) is a program in which instructional strategies integrate academic and pre-vocational skills. MIS VI (Basic/Vision) is designed for students with visual impairments. MIS VII (Functional Academic Skills/Vision) is designed for students with visual impairments and mild to moderate mental retardation. MIS VIII (Basic/Hearing) is designed for students with hearing impairments who require special education instructional services from a teacher of the deaf and hard of hearing. MIS IX (Industrially Based School/Vocational Training Center) is designed for students with handicapping conditions ages 17 to 21 and provides vocational experiences in preparation for entry-level jobs in areas such as construction, office practises, building maintenance, food service, hotel/hospitality service, retailing, dental and medical assistant practises. This information about the different types of special education programs was also obtained from the Educational Services For Students with Handicapping Conditions put out by the New York City Public Schools.

Student Success

Elaine Greenbaum in her article "Disability Isn't That Romantic" said that "Regular education teachers found it difficult to adapt curricula"(Greenbaum, 1994, p. 46) , but as difficult as it might be we must do so. As I searched for information I was able to learn certain things that I as a general education teacher can do to help my special education

students. In Something's Wrong With My Child I found these "challenges" for improving teaching which would improve behaviour and learning:

> Try success - use tasks the child is ready to undertake
>
> Try courtesy - respect each child even when childs turbulent emotions are expressed in anger, even when the child demonstrates agression, even when the child behaves in a manner that may be distasteful, repulsive, nasty, stubborn even profane.
>
> Try recognition - recognize the childs individuality, pace and learning style
>
> Try independence and adequacy - make certain the child can succeed.
>
> Try fitting the difficulty level to the child.
>
> Try almost anything except derogation and reproach. (Brutten, Richardson, & Mangel, 1973, p. 115-116)

These "challenges" remind us that we as teachers need to put ourselves aside and really put children first even those that cause us the greatest difficulties. In the article "Two dozen-plus ideas that will help special needs kids" I found certain things which I have been doing because I noticed the needs of my students, these were:

> Having pre-cut pieces available.
>
> Talking students through a task.(Boyle & Korn-Rothschild, 1994, p. 74)

The things I had not thought of which I feel my students could benefit from are:

> Help students visualize an image - this is very useful in mathematics.
>
> Copying is easier from a near point than a far point. Avoid seating arrangements that require the student to "turn" in his/her seat to view the board and then "turn" to return to work. (p. 75)

Special education students differ in ability, age, learning style, and personality just as all children do. Students are determined eligible for and placed in special education because their learning needs appear to differ from those of other similarly aged students. Plans for helping students with special learning needs are made jointly by parents or

guardians, teachers, other professionals, and, many times, the students themselves.(LeVert & LeVert, 1994, p. 109)

My Experience

What happens when a teacher is not given the opportunity to plan ahead for special education classes? I teach Chapter I Mathematics in an intermediate school and have eleven computers in my room. The computers were the reason I was given the special education classes. It was decided to expose the children to computers so all general education teachers with computers in their rooms were given special education classes. At the start of each year I begin by setting some rules for classroom behaviour . These rules have to do with respecting one another , showing that we can cooperate with each other and the teacher, being responsible for ourselves and the quality of our work, and coming to class prepared to work with the correct attitude and eqipment. I expect these rules to be followed by the students in the class. What does one do when all these rules are being broken at once? When I'd finally stop one incident another incident would need my attention. Even with the help of the para-professional who comes with the class it was impossible. As a general education teacher I have had students who from time to time did not follow the rules set in the classroom. These students have been reminded of their responsibilities to themselves, the teacher and each other; being reminded of these responsibilities would usually end the episode. If the student insisted in continuing the inappropriate behaviour they would be sent to the dean and would be asked to bring their parents which usually stopped their misbehaviour for some time. When confronted with students who continually broke the rules and by so doing disrupted the class in such a way that it was impossible to teach I found myself wondering "What am I doing wrong?" "Why can't I stop these children from disrupting the class?" I needed to find a way to reach my students so that learning could take place. I started to make change after change and nothing seemed to help. I changed the set up of my room from groups of eight to groups of four to rows. I changed the number of students at the computer from half the

class to five at a time which was one third of the class so that more students would work with me than on their own. I stopped putting students at the computers for a time because of lack of cooperation. In my plans for the special education classes I broke the lesson into more parts so that I would be able to teach them something in the 10 minutes they permitted me to teach without alot of interruptions. Most of the class time was filled with reminders of watch what you say, remember we respect each other, sit down, stop running around the room, stop arguing, keep your hands to yourselves, take out a sheet of paper so you can do your work, your group goes to the computer next time you must do this work today. I found that these instructions had to be repeated over and over during one class period and each new day was a repetition of the one before.

Experiences of other teachers

I decided to ask the other computer teachers who were three in number and who were also teaching special education classes for the first time how it was going for them in their classroom. I asked them to respond to the following questions in writing:

Do you find that there are great differences with special education classes?

Have you had to change your teaching methods?

How do you feel as a general education teacher teaching special education classes?

Teacher #1: Fred who has one of the labs had this to say:

"When I was given special education classes to teach for the first time I was not very excited because having taught accelerated classes with very good skills it was quite shocking to teach students with very limited skills in reading and mathematics. Most of the students are reading on a second or third grade level, if that high. Many are unable to read at all. Preparation of lessons for special ed students has meant completely revising curriculum objectives because of the lack of or limited skills. Much longer periods of time are required to cover required material. Planning entails "watering-down" of subject material. Abstract concepts are difficult to teach. Maintaining discipline and an environment conducive to learning is a constant obstacle. Special ed students seem to

have shorter attention spans and need to be reminded constantly (daily) of behavioral procedures. Not being a special ed teacher and without training in special ed presents many problems for a mainstream teacher who is not equipped to deal with youngsters who have special educational needs. Many are not interested in learning at all. Many come to school with the sole purpose of disrupting lessons. Some refuse to work at all. It is not unusual for them to call out, engage in conversation, use obscenities, hide under desks or tables and frankly just try to be disrespectful. Frequently you will hear them say "I'm special ed"; "you stress me out", "you give me too much work, "I'm not supposed to do that kind of work", "My mother says that work is too hard." Also many special ed students receive special services such as speech and counseling and I have found that to be quite disruptive in terms of continuity of instruction because many students are pulled during my class time for those special services."

Teacher #2: Eloise who has the other lab had this to say:

"I teach computer mathematics to two special education classes. On day one, I go over the class rules and have the students complete index cards with their names, addresses , phone numbers, parents names, etc. This experience was a real eye opener for me. The students guided in the completion of the index cards took an unusually long time. One student had his name printed, in large letters, on a card to refer to before he could write his name. Most of the students did not know their complete addresses, could not spell the street or avenue, could not spell their parents' names, and /or did not know the year they were born. They were to bring this information in the following day-they did not. Copying the rules from the board was a real challenge; the students were unable to "copy" what was printed on the board. When they returned the following day, they did not have the work they started the previous day. I grew frustrated, and spoke with the supervisor of special education. She asked why was it necessary for them to copy! From then on I gave them handouts of everything. I have made the following observations about special education students:

They have great difficulty remembering what was learned the previous day.

They have very short attention spans and are easily distracted.

The students have not mastered basic facts in reading, writing, and math.

The students have real difficulty with basic math computations.

Several of the students are on medication; some days they are very active and other days inactive.

There is a lot of movement. The students get out of their seats often for various reasons.

Students are out of class often for special services.

The students are impulsive. Many would go through a test in a matter of minutes by putting down the first thing (answer) that came into their heads.

The special education student will talk out, call out, make irrelevant comments, insult (snap) classmates.

Many did not seem to have close relationships with their classmates.

Needless to say, I had to make several modifications in my lessons and in the classroom. For example, I had to allow the students to use time tables and calculators. The best part of this experience is that the students enjoy coming to the computer room."

Teacher #3: Michelle who has the other partial lab and teaches Chapter I reading says: "I've been teaching for longer than I care to admit. I possess licenses in special education and reading and yet was still unprepared for the MIS I classes given to me this school year. First of all I had no advanced warning that I would be programmed to teach special education classes. Although I do teach students with reading difficulties, the materials I had on hand were inappropriate for most of the MIS I students. Consequently, I was faced with the dilemma of teaching students with extremely limited skills and few instructional materials. Secondly, the behavior of the groups forced me to focus more on classroom management than on teaching. Having computers in the classroom has been only somewhat helpful. Most of the software programs I have require at least an upper third grade reading level. Therefore I use computers primarily for word processing. But

even this activity is frustrating of the non reader. In fact, one of my non readers refuses to use the computer at all. Furthermore, the Appleworks program for the Apple requires different instructions than the Writing Center for the Macintosh. If my para is unavailable we rarely use the computers. Especially since there are not enough computers for each student, requiring a group of students to do seatwork activities which presents still another problem. In conclusion, having limited resources and students with learning and behavior difficulties has made this school year a challenge."

Summary

The number of children needing special eduction has increased. The need for teachers and support service professionals has increased. The need for the general education teacher to become more involved in special education has increased. We as general education teachers need to ask for certain things from our supervisors. First we should ask for training so that we can know the children we will be dealing with before we receive these children in our classrooms. Second we should be able to meet with the students special education teacher and support service professionals to discuss the childs performance; to discuss what to continue and/or what to change so that the student can succeed. Third we should ask for workshops were materials are given and demonstrated which we could use with the groups we are teaching. Lessons and planned activities should be made available to be shared so that there is a wider range of materials that can be used with the special education children. Individually we need to become more aware of what

is happening to special education, what changes are taking place in the placement of children and more importantly we need to know why our student became a part of the special education family.

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